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ABSTRACT

The author questions the applicability of a value-system-contrast approach to intercultural communication. His two main reservations involve the deprivation and validity of value sets themselves and the potential dangers encounterable in using values as a guide to intercultural communication. Firstly, the non-scientific methods employed in compiling and categorizing value systems themselves, and the difficulty of determining the cause of particular values that are also constantly changing, contribute to the questionable validity of value systems which are externally and/or politically derived. Secondly, reliance on preconceived value sets as intercultural communication variables or guides may result in desensitization of the communicator who uses them and creation of an environment for self-fulfilling prophecy based on false interpretation. The author examines value set categorizations of Mexican-Americans in light of value system theory and intercultural communication. (Author/LG)

THE VALUE SYSTEM--A FALSE PROPHET FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

by

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The Chicano accepts as fact that he exists subject to God's will.

The Anglo is concerned with upward mobility and believes that success depends on personal effort.

The Chicano is noncompetitive.
The Anglo is highly competitive.

The Chicano values individualism and believes that personal goals are more important than group goals. He is not a joiner.

The Anglo values universalism and readily gives his allegiance to a group or an abstract principle. He believes in "all for one and one for all" and "rally around the flag boys."

The "game" of contrasting value systems has become very popular in the past few years, especially in intercultural communication research. The use of value system theory in speech communication studies is not that new, however. In 1958, Edward Steele, writing in Western Speech proposed a theory of value system for the area of rhetoric and public address. Steele has subsequently refined and developed those concepts and many others have profitably used them--especially in rhetorical criticism. The closing sentences of Steele's original article perhaps foreordained one of the popular approaches to the study of intercultural communication. Steele wrote, "much additional study is needed, not only of the dominant shared value orientations in the American Value System, but of the variant and deviant orientations shared by ethnic or regional social groups. The student of rhetoric should be among those providing these insights and among those studying their practical applications."[1]

Since that time, value system theory has become a standard approach to intercultural communication and is implied, at least, in many of the works in the field. The basic premise of value system theory is that you must understand the norms and values of the group to whom you plan

to communicate and that with this knowledge you can better adapt your communication and more effectively avoid communication breakdown. The standard definition of values is that they are "commonly shared conceptions of the desirable."[2] After determining these shared conceptions of what is good or desirable, one can then use that information in making meaningful communication choices when speaking to a member of a particular target group. Conversely, the theory argues that communication breakdowns occur when contrasting values of two cultures are not understood by the two communicators.

The theory, we would all agree, is plausible and would seem to be a very practical and useful approach to intercultural communication. Unfortunately, the practical applications of the theory and the theory itself harbor a number of dangers that should be understood by the potential intercultural communicator especially if that communication is on the interpersonal level. This paper will explore the thesis that there are so many pitfalls in using value system theory that it may be more detrimental than it is worth. To be sure, it is important to know as much about a culture as possible and values or "shared conceptions of the desirable" would be very helpful if they can be determined and effectively used. There are two major problem areas that are of concern. First, the problem of the derivation and validity of the values themselves and second, the potential dangers involved in using values as a guide in intercultural situations.

A validity question can be raised about values because of the lack of agreement among experts concerning the true values of a particular culture. Even a cursory survey of Sociology textbooks and writings

reveals a rather striking disagreement about the values of the dominant American culture--not to mention other cultures with whom we might be communicating. A study by Joseph Himes of various inventories of dominant American value orientations revealed some overlapping of values but the variations and contradictions were more striking than the similarities.[3]

Another disconcerting component to value system research is the lack of documentation or explanation of how these values were derived. One is finally led to the conclusion that many lists of values are probably intuitively derived. Other lists suspiciously appear to be derived by plagiarizing someone else's "intuitively" derived categories.

Finally, categories of values, especially those used in intercultural communication, are generally externally created. That is, we assign values to a culture on the basis of our perceptions about it rather than using values that that culture has developed about itself. For example, it is interesting to compare value systems of Mexican Americans. If we are to believe these value systems, the Chicano culture is capable of changing from sleepy picturesque, and gentle people to vicious "frito banditos" of the Pancho Villa type almost at will.

Such lists of values are, of course, politically oriented and as Sociologist W. Richard Scott summarizes, "It is often the case that assertions of this kind are based upon official ideologies or on the opinions of 'experts' when the evidence required--namely, analysis of the actual beliefs of representative samples . . . is lacking."[4]

When we derive values intuitively and politically, they are suspect as true indicators of the culture and thus are meaningless as guides to communication choices. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case with value systems more often than not.

It is little wonder then that inventories of values are often found to be inconsistent. If no controlled or scientific procedure is used to determine values, the result for the intercultural communicator is likely to be confusingly contradictory. Sydney Harris, in his book Majority of One, humorously contrasted a lengthy list of value contradictions of the dominant American culture. Among the many dichotomies of American belief that he listed are these:

> America "believes that all people are basically the same everywhere--but that you can't really trust foreigners."
>
> It believes that the Latin people know how to relax and enjoy life better than we do--but that they're lazy and will never get anywhere.
>
> It believes that Russia is a Godless, materialistic state--but that it's good for us to acquire as many material possessions as we can get our hands on.
>
> It believes that the cast system has no place in a democratic society--but that the size and price of the car you drive is a mark of your relative social position.
>
> It believes, in short, a mass of contradictory statements, half of which cancel out the other half, and all of which add up to the most confused set of ideals that any nation has fallen heir to in the history of the world.[5]

The contradictory characteristic of value systems lead us to other reasons why they should be shunned as guides for intercultural communication. Even if it were possible to devise a scientific method for accurately determining the values of a particular culture, we might still experience contradictions in our list because of the difficulty of delineating a concise and homogeneous culture which we can measure. Presumably, each sub-culture within a culture has its own values which are often at variance with the larger culture or with another sub-culture. It is easy for us to think of Americans of Mexican descent as one more-or-less compact group with virtually the same characteristics, norms, and values. To do so, of course, is a serious mistake. In research which I conducted earlier, I delineated about a dozen distinct sub-cultures which might be included under the "Mexican American" rubric. When I showed this classification to a Chicano friend, he quickly told me that he couldn't find himself or his associates in any of these categories. It is, therefore, rather easy to understand why value systems are generally broad, simplistic and at the same time contradictory. In order to describe a culture of any size, it is difficult not to be otherwise. The dilemma that we face becomes apparent. If we are specific and concise about the values of a culture, we run the risk of over generatlization and thus error. If our list of values is broad enough to cover all the various facets of the culture, it is likely to be of little, if any, worth to us when

Closely related to the problem of delineating a homogeneous group for value system analysis is the problem of mistaking the causal factors which account for the particular values. Two years ago when I read Professor Jack Daniel's article on the value system of poverty cultures,[6] I was struck by the similarity between his description of the values of poverty groups and a description that I read a few days earlier which purported to describe the Mexican American culture. A week or so later I ran across a similar set of values but this time it was concerned with Black Americans.

The questions we must ask are, do certain values describe a particular sub-culture, and if so, which one, or do they describe some other factor such as poverty, lack of education or whatever? Does the culture of poverty transcend a particular ethnic culture or are they the same? The enigma for the communicator is perplexing--with whom does he use messages based on a particular set of values?

Another problem with value system categories is that the values of a particular group are subject to change. If we were able to construct an accurate and concise list for a clearly defined group, we would have to realize that the list might soon be out of date and consequently erroneous. It is not uncommon to find values still ascribed to urban Mexican Americans that once might have been a valid description of the rural, agrarian society from which many Mexican Americans came. However, after this group has lived, even for a short time, in an urban environment, the original set of values may be completely meaningless.

Likewise as any group is subjected to a change in their society, such as mass media communication from other parts of the world, we might expect value systems to make corresponding changes. A dramatic example of such value changes was described by anthropologist Colin Turnbull in his book, The Mountain People.[7] The study is about a small African tribe known as the Ik. In a single generation, the Ik were transformed from a family-oriented, gregarious, generous, and affectionate people into a society of monsters with no love, generosity, compassion, or kindness for their fellow man. This change came about because an indifferent Uganda government forced the small hunting society into an agricultural life because the Ik hunting lands were needed as a preserve for Africa's vanishing species. Incidentally, it is Turnbull's fear, if not quite his conclusion, that what happened to the Ik can happen to us. Again, the would-be intercultural communicator has no assurance that the values he is using as the basis of his communication are still operative with the group or individual he is addressing. Thus, there are a number of weaknesses in determining reliable values for use in inter-cultural communication on an interpersonal level.

I would also like to advance the argument that even if we were able to create a reliable and valid set of values that accurately reflected a particular culture at a particular time there use might still be detrimental to the intercultural communicator. There are four reasons why this might be the case.

First, it is perhaps too apparent to suggest that the values of a group may not be the values of an individual within that group. Even

if we were able to establish a list of true values, values are by nature subject to much individual interpretation. Thus the intercultural communicator, when dealing on an interpersonal level, may find that his carefully studied inventory of values is a detriment rather than an asset if he encounters an individual who does not hold all the typical values of the culture.

The individual within a culture fulfills many roles and each of these roles may have value systems of their own. The receiver of our intercultural message may at once be a member of a political party, educational level, racial or ethnic classification, age group, or religious sect. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which set of values may be most influential upon him at any particular time. Rich and Ogawa identified a number of these variables in the paper they presented at the International Communication Association Convention in Phoenix in 1971.[8]

Second, we have no assurance that even if a set of values is true that they are reflected as communication variables. For example, the concept of "machismo" is commonly listed as a cultural value of some Mexican American groups. In its simpler form "machismo" implies that the male is dominant and makes the critical decisions for the family. The female is supposedly sheltered and submissive. In a field study which I conducted, we tested this value as a communication factor.[9] Mexican American respondents were asked who should receive certain messages coming into the home and who should respond to them, through both oral and written channels. It was anticipated that because of the

"machismo" value, a male member of the family would be the preferred receiver and sender of messages. However, no such correlation was found. Instead, the marital conditions (divorce, separation, etc.) of the individual family appeared to be far more correlated than the value of machismo. Indeed, if this value is operative, many Chicano women have apparently not been told about it. One might question the study or the nature of the value and its application but the point remains that we have no evidence or assurance that any value is going to be reflected in a communication variable. Until we have this information, communication through value system approaches is of questionable worth.

Third, too much reliance on values as a guide to communication may serve to desensitize the communicator to such an extent that he may become less effective. Recently, a group of Anglo students who had been thoroughly instructed about the history, culture, and value system of Mexican Americans were sent out into the barrios of East Los Angeles. When they returned, many of the students reported that when they tried to adapt to the value system of the Chicano in their conversations, they were met with communication breakdowns. This, of course, may simply be a matter of intercultural inexperience but it would seem that too great a reliance on and concern for value systems as a guide, might block out or diminish sensistivity to verbal and non-verbal feedback. Too much reliance on value system as a guide may also have the disadvantage of making the communicator so concerned that he not violate a norm or value that he might, as a consequence, set up barriers to free and uninhibited interpersonal communication.

Finally, value system theory may prove not only to be a false prophet for the communicator but also a self-fulfilling prophet. After learning the values of a particular culture, even if they are valid, the communicator may create a communication environment which insures that the values will be operative. This kind of thing can happen, of course, even in such a detached and non-pressurized atmosphere as research.

Deluvina Hernandez, in a thorough but very bitter denunciation of two research projects, rather convincingly shows that preconceived judgements about the values of Mexican Americans was the cause of invalid research conclusions. In her summary she emphasizes this point:

> A particular set of traits, which the researchers have called 'value orientation' is representative of the objects' cumulative experiences. The sociological use of a model is not in studying the components merely to identify them or distinguish them, but in searching behind each element to discover what has given rise to it. Unless this important aspect of research...is included, many crucial factors are excluded; this results in incomplete relationships and findings, and misleading interpretations. This has been the result of (these) studies. . .[10]

If such problems are found in research, which can be more slowly and carefully scrutinized, it would seem that the self-fulfilling prophecy syndrome would even be more prevalent in interpersonal communication which does not have the advantage of careful reflection.

It is the conclusion of this paper, then, that value system theory is a questionable approach for intercultural communication. First, the derivation and validity of values is open to question. There

is disagreement on what are the true values of a particular culture, values are compiled in non-scientific methods, they are externally derived and are subject to political and other motivations. Value systems are often inconsistent and by necessity very broad and thus misleading about a particular sub-culture. It is also difficult to determine the cause of particular values and they are constantly changing.

Secondly, even if we were able to create valid and reliable sets of values, they would still be dangerous to use in intercultural communication because they are subject to individual variations, they may not be reflected in communication variables, they may desensitize the communicator who uses them, and they may create the environment for a self-fulfilling prophecy. At best, values are only vague approximations and indicators of communication choices and at worst, they may be completely misleading and be the responsible factor for intercultural communication breakdown. It is important that we exercise caution when using value systems lest they become the false prophets of intercultural communication.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Edward D. Steele, "Social Values in Public Address," Western Speech, Vol. XXII, No. 1. (Winter, 1958), p. 42, underlining added.

[2]James W. Vander Zanden, Sociology: A Systematic Approach, 2nd ed. (New York: Ronald Press, 1970), p. 57.

[3]Joseph H. Himes, "The Organization of American Values: A Theoretical Model," Alpha Kappa Deltan, (Autumn, 1956), p. 17.

[4]W. Richard Scott, Social Processes and Social Structures: An Introduction to Sociology. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1970), p. 34.

[5]Sydney J. Harris, Majority of One, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957), pp. 84-85.

[6]Jack Daniel, "The Poor: Aliens in an Affluent Society: Cross-Cultural Communication," Today's Speech, Vol. 18, No. 1, (Winter, 1970), pp. 15-21.

[7]Colin Turnbull, The Mountain People, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

[8]Andrea L. Rich and Dennis M. Ogawa, "Intercultural and Interracial Communication: An Analytical Approach." Reprinted in Samovar and Porter, Intercultural Communication: A Reader, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 23-31.

[9]Howard P. Holladay, "A Study of Communication Preferences of Mexican American Parents," (Mimeographed), California State University, Los Angeles, July, 1971.

[10]Deluvina Hernandez, "Mexican American Challenge to a Sacred Cow," Mexican American Cultural Center, Monograph No. 1, University of California (Los Angeles, March, 1970), p. 48.